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U.S. IS CONVINCED THAT K.G.B. AGENT WANTS TO GO HOME

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 5 — State Department officials tonight interviewed Vitaly Yurchenko, a K.G.B. official who had been described as a prized defector to the United States, and said they were convinced that he had freely decided to return to the Soviet Union.

At the Soviet Embassy, a spokesman said Mr. Yurchenko planned to leave the country "as soon as possible."

Mr. Yurchenko embarrassed American officials on Monday when he appeared at a news conference at the Soviet Embassy and charged he had been the victim of kidnapping and torture.

Criticism in Congress

On Capitol Hill today, lawmakers voiced sharp criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency's handling of Mr. Yurchenko. [Page A14.]

The C.I.A. was described by knowledgeable officials as being bewildered over the episode.

Senior intelligence officials said it remained unclear whether Mr. Yurchenko a participant in a Soviet hoax or a genuine defector who changed his mind. Several officials said Mr. Yurchenko had been disappointed by the collapse of a love affair with a woman in Canada and angered by a succession of news stories about him.

Congressional leaders said they had questioned the C.I.A. about Mr. Yurchenko and had been repeatedly assured that he was trustworthy.

"Something Is Wrong"

"You either have got a defector who was allowed to just walk away under circumstances that I still can't accept and cause a significant embarrassment to the United States," said Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. "Or you have a double agent who was planted on the United States and then you have far more than a significant embarrassment, you have an out-and-out calamity."

"No matter what, something is wrong," he said.

Mr. Yurchenko, wearing a light gray suit and a sweater, walked into the State Department at 6:07 P.M. escorted by several Soviet officials. He left the building an hour later, walking briskly past reporters' microphones. In

response to a shouted question about whether he was going home, he clasped his hands above his head like a prize fighter and declared, "Yes, home."

No Evidence of Drugs

A State Department spokesman said a doctor had seen no evidence during the meeting that Mr. Yurchenko had been drugged or was otherwise in an altered psychological state.

As Congressional criticism spread, the White House appeared to stand back from the affair, saying only that President Reagan had been informed on Monday — nearly two days after Mr. Yurchenko slipped away — of the latest twist in the affair.

A senior White House official said today that Reagan aides had watched Mr. Yurchenko's televised news conference to assess its significance for the summit meeting with Mikhail S. Gorbachev in Geneva this month.

"This shows us exactly what we are up against in Geneva," the senior official said. "We are all obviously keenly aware that under Gorbachev, things are quite different." The official was alluding to the increasing Soviet willingness to take on the White House in international public relations.

One immediate effect of Mr. Yur-

chenko's decision, a Justice Department official said, was that the criminal case against Edward L. Howard, a former C.I.A. officer, would be considerably weakened. Administration officials have said that with Mr. Yurchenko's help, they were able to identify Mr. Howard as the man who tipped off the Russians about a valued American intelligence source in Moscow.

Mr. Howard has fled the United States. An F.B.I. spokesman said the case was still being investigated.

Unclear What He Learned

Knowledgeable officials said it was unclear if Mr. Yurchenko had gained sensitive information in his three months of conversations with the C.I.A.

Senator Malcolm Wallop, Republican of Wyoming and a former member of the intelligence committee, said Mr. Yurchenko would certainly have become an expert on C.I.A. debriefing methods and would have been able to deduce areas of concern to the C.I.A.

But an intelligence official who recently left the C.I.A. said questioning in such cases is carefully handled to protect important information. In addition, he said, the questions that would be put to a defector about methods of intelligence gathering are "rather obvious."

At his news conference Monday, Mr. Yurchenko asserted that he had been kidnapped, drugged and held by the

C.I.A. for nearly three months. The State Department denied his charges and said he had been voluntarily aiding the C.I.A. and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

On Capitol Hill, at the White House and among former intelligence officials, theories spread quickly today.

Senator Leahy said he was convinced that Mr. Yurchenko was a double agent "foisted" on the C.I.A. Several other senators questioned why Mr. Yurchenko had been loosely supervised Saturday at what one official said was a meal at a Washington restaurant. As Senator William Cohen, Republican of Maine put it: "When you step into the world of mirrors, it's very hard to determine reality from reflection."

American officials say Mr. Yurchenko defected to the West in August while on a trip to Italy. Officials have identified him as deputy chief of K.G.B. directorate that supervises espionage operations in North America. He formerly served as first secretary at Soviet Embassy in Washington from 1975 to 1980.

He was closely questioned by C.I.A. agents and submitted to several polygraph tests. An intelligence source said today that he had provided significant information that had been verified.

American intelligence specialists and others familiar with the handling of defectors said there was little likelihood that the Russians had been able to contact Mr. Yurchenko, in order to lure or threaten him, while he was in American custody.

Under international law, Soviet representatives are entitled to access to Soviet citizens in the United States — as American representatives have similar rights in the Soviet Union — in order to ascertain that the citizens are not being held against their will. But there was no indication that the Russians had asked for or won the right to see Mr. Yurchenko before his decision to return home.

Although it is not known what actually motivated Mr. Yurchenko, a Washington lawyer specializing in defectors said today that Soviet officials seeking to lure defectors back often arrange telephone calls to family members or bring them letters from home.

"One of their techniques is to let defectors talk to their families on the phone," said the lawyer, Bill Geimer, who runs the Jamestown Foundation, which helps Soviet bloc defectors. "The more they talk, the more homesick they get," said Mr. Geimer, who also recently represented one of the highest-ranking Soviet defectors, Arkady N. Shevchenko.

He suggested that if American agents had in fact allowed Mr. Yurchenko to talk to his 16-year-old son, it might have been a mistake. "There's a surprising looseness to some of the supervision," he said.

At his news conference, Mr. Yurchenko alluded to the difficulties in raising his 16-year old son.